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All Enron Cards on the Table

Talk cards with any good poker player and the discussion will soon turn to "tells": the unintended signals other players give that reveal whether they hold good hands or bad.

Last week, the Bush administration gave its clearest "tell" yet that it doesn't like its Enron hand. In response to my inquiries about contacts between administration officials and Enron executives, a senior White House official warned: "Waxman risks transforming himself into the Dan Burton of the Democrats."

This unusual jab wasn't meant as friendly career advice. Republican White Houses rarely throw gratuitous insults at senior Republican members of Congress like Mr. Burton, the chairman of the Government Reform Committee. To make sure the message wasn't lost, the White House press secretary later called my efforts a "partisan waste of taxpayer money."

These blunt personal attacks signal a high level of White House anxiety: Its strategy is to discredit me and make other Democrats nervous about investigating Enron's influence on White House policies.

What's especially odd is that these attacks are coming even though I've been careful not to make any accusations about the president, the vice president or any of their staff. Having seen the mistakes of Republican investigations into the Clinton administration at close range, I have no interest in repeating the pattern of accuse first and investigate later. A better way is to ask for relevant information before reaching conclusions.

For the past two months my staff has been conducting a broad inquiry into Enron's collapse. We've been trying to learn how thousands of American families were robbed of their financial security. As a minority member of the House, I can't call hearings or issue subpoenas, but a Web tip line has been surprisingly helpful in identifying parts of the puzzle.

What offends the White House are the questions I have been asking about Enron's contacts with administration officials. While the investigation into Enron shouldn't be driven by politics, no area—including Enron's political activities—should be off limits.

The Bush administration wants to wall off its relationship with Enron from congressional inquiry. In essence, it argues that the president has a constitutional right to block investigation into the influence of special interests on White House policy. The administration has even rebuffed the efforts of the General Accounting Office to learn what actions Enron requested from the vice president's energy task force, forcing GAO to consider the unprecedented step of suing the White House.

Some facts are coming to light nonetheless. Enron was the administration's biggest campaign contributor. The company's lobbyists met secretly and repeatedly with the vice president's energy task force. The final energy plan contained 17 provisions that Enron wanted.

Last April, Enron CEO Ken Lay met with Vice President Dick Cheney, urging him to oppose price relief in the California energy crisis. The next day, the vice president called the Los Angeles Times and argued against price caps. Two months later, the vice president raised Enron's concerns about the Dabhol power plant with a senior official from India.

Lay weighed in with the White House director of personnel about appointments to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The president later nominated candidates apparently supported by Lay. Lay also called Office of Management and Budget Director Mitch Daniels to lobby for the repeal of the corporate minimum tax. The administration subsequently endorsed the House-passed stimulus bill, which repealed the tax and gave Enron a $254 million windfall.

Because all the facts are not yet in, congressional Democrats have carefully refrained from alleging that the White House took specific actions because of Enron's lobbying. But the White House is wrong to hide behind this reasonable restraint as a justification for resisting congressional inquiries about Enron's extraordinary access.

It's also appropriate to ask the administration questions about its reaction to Enron's collapse. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and others made the right call in not bailing Enron out. But had Secretary O'Neill initiated an expedited investigation into the conduct of Enron executives, he could have discovered in October that they had cashed out $1 billion in stock and that Enron employees were in a 401(k) "lock-down." Even then, it might have been difficult for the administration to take steps to mitigate the harm to Enron employees and other victims, but no one even tried.

It's time for the administration to draw a new hand. It should begin with complete disclosure of all the Cheney energy task force records. Just as important is a full accounting of all administration contacts with Enron representatives. Nothing else will resolve legitimate questions that deserve explanation—or fulfill the new approach that George W. Bush promised to bring to Washington.

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